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RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000490

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: NEWSPAPER PUBLISHES OPPOSITION CONVERSATION WITH  
BRITISH DIPLOMAT

REF: YEREVAN 00396

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Classified By: POLOFF: Lindsay Fisher for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On April 21, Golos Armenii a government-leaning Russian language newspaper, published a transcript of a clandestinely-recorded conversation between an opposition leader and a British diplomat. The piece claimed that the opposition politician -- former parliament speaker and Orinats Yerkir party president Artur Baghdassarian -- pressed for a strong international statement condemning Armenian authorities ahead of the May 12 parliamentary elections. We assume -- and so does the UK Embassy -- that the transcript is genuine and that the recording was made by the intelligence services. We have raised our concerns about the privacy of diplomatic discussions and about the involvement of the intelligence services in the election campaign with the Foreign Ministry, but have not yet succeeded in reaching the Prime Minister. The UK Embassy has so far been reluctant to respond publicly to this incident; we are working with them to ensure our response -- and that of the rest of the dip corps here -- supports theirs.  
END SUMMARY

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GOLOS ARMENII PUBLISHES SCANDAL OF THE WEEKEND  
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12. (C) Armenian news outlets this weekend widely covered the release by "Golos Armenii" of a transcript of a conversation in a Yerevan restaurant between Artur Baghdasaryan and a British diplomat (unspecified in the press piece, but confirmed by the UK Embassy to have been DCM Richard Hyde). The recording was made without the knowledge of either party. The piece was read on air -- often in its entirety -- by virtually all Armenian television stations. The article quoted excerpts from the conversation, providing extremely negative and conspiracy-minded interpretations. The paper claims that Baghdassarian, along with his foreign policy advisor Tigran Mkrtchyan and a British interpreter, pressed the diplomat for a tough international statement ahead of the 12 May parliamentary elections. (NOTE: We have sent an unofficial translation of the complete article to EUR/CARC. END NOTE).

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OY ANNOYED BY EXCESSIVE COVERAGE, BUT STAYS ON POINT  
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13. (C) Embassy officials met on Monday with Mkrtchyan, who confirmed the substance of the story. Mkrtchyan said OY released an internet response on Sunday and is planning to

use its two minutes of government-allotted campaign TV time on Monday to air a reaction. He also commented that OY plans to appropriately push back against the story but avoid being muddled in the issue, continuing with their regular campaign activities, which include door-knocking and get-out-the-vote leaflet campaigns in the city and surrounding regions. We have touched base with the British Embassy in Yerevan and have reached out to the Republican Party leadership to encourage a statement condemning the illicit recording and the subsequent publication of an abbreviated transcript.

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WE TAKE IT TO THE GOVERNMENT  
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14. (C) We reached Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian to register our disapproval of the incident, and urge him to make a statement (as PM and as Republican Party chief) condemnig the clandestine taping (or any other form of intelligence service activity) as having no appropriate place in an election campaign. Sargsian equivocated. First saying he was unsure how to react to the allegation that the intelligence services were involved, Sargsian then said that he would prefer to discuss the matter face to face with CDA at their previously-scheduled meeting to be held April 25. Sargsian commented that "Bagdisarian was more off base than you realize." CDA reiterated the point that the activity was out of bounds, but agreed to continue the discussion in person on April 25.

15. (C) Separately, we had earlier contacted the Foreign Minister's office to express our concern about the incident, warning that monitoring of diplomatic conversations was unacceptable and that the use of intelligence services in the pre-election campaign would almost certainly be noted by international observers monitoring the election.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) The fact that the February recording was held for several weeks before its release suggests it was done so for purely political purposes, and the timing of the release could be an attempt to temper the upward trending of OY,s favorable image in polls, which has been consistent in recent months and even improving in the last few weeks.

17. (C) We assume that Armenia's National Security Service (NSS) carried out the surveillance and made the recording. If our assumption is correct, this marks the second time that the intel services have been used to influence this election campaign. The first (ref) was when a journalist was hauled in for a "preventive discussion" after publishing anti-government articles.  
GODFREY